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Examining Visual Branding, Student Perception, and Student Preference in Indonesian Private Universities: An SOR-Based Study

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Abstract

The increasing competition in higher education has encouraged universities to strengthen visual branding as a strategic communication tool. This study examines visual branding, student perception, and student preference within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework. In this study, student preference refers to prospective students' attitudinal tendency to consider, prioritize, and recommend a university rather than actual enrollment behavior. Using a quantitative explanatory approach, data were collected from 230 prospective students through a structured questionnaire and analyzed using Partial Least Squares–Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). The results show that visual branding significantly influences student perception and student preference. Student perception also plays a significant explanatory role in translating visual branding stimuli into preference judgments. Mediation analysis further reveals a partial mediating effect of perception between visual branding and student preference. These findings highlight the importance of consistent and meaningful visual branding in shaping institutional value and student decision-making in higher education. This study contributes to the literature by providing empirical evidence on the psychological mechanism underlying visual branding effectiveness within the SOR framework and extends the application of SOR theory in higher education, particularly in post-merger private universities in Indonesia.

Keywords: Visual Branding; Student Perception; Student Preference; Higher Education; SOR Theory

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INTRODUCTION

The changing landscape of global higher education shows that universities are now competing not only through academic quality, but also through the image and visual identity displayed to the public. In an increasingly competitive education market, branding is an important strategy to build a positive perception of prospective students and society (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2016; Yaping et al., 2023). Visual identities that include logos, colors, typography, and promotional material design have proven to be a crucial factor in creating differentiation and increasing trust among Generation Z who are highly responsive to visual communication (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Lowe & El Hakim, 2020).

Globally, the consistency of a university's visual identity contributes significantly to brand equity and the preferences of international students. Institutions such as Harvard and the National University of Singapore show that a strong academic reputation needs to be supported by the consistent implementation of visual branding across communication channels (Camilleri, 2021; Litasari, 2024; Nadiri et al., 2009). This trend confirms that design-based branding has become an integral part of modern higher education management strategies.

This phenomenon can be seen in private universities (PTS) in Indonesia, which number more than 3,000 institutions and compete fiercely in attracting new students (Litasari, 2024). LLDIKTI data shows that many private universities face challenges in maintaining the number of students when the visual image of the campus is unclear or inconsistent (Lubis et al., 2023). Private universities with attractive and modern visual images tend to be preferred by prospective students over other private universities with similar academic quality but weak branding (Luckyardi et al., 2023). Thus, visual communication design is now an important value proposition in increasing the competitiveness of private universities.

Student preferences, especially generation Z, are heavily influenced by a culture of visual information consumption that emphasizes aesthetics, speed of access, and consistency of messages (Šola & Zia, 2021; Yoga Kharisma & Haryono, 2023). Research shows that the perception of a university's visual image on social media influences the decision to choose a college (Šola & Zia, 2021). This process is in line with the theory of Stimulus–Organism–Response (S–O–R), in which the visual element of branding functions as a stimulus that is processed cognitively and affectively (organism), before producing a response in the form of a preference to choose a university (Mehrabian &

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Russell, 1974). Thus, DKV-based branding is a strategic psychological mechanism in shaping student preferences.

Branding faces challenges in maintaining Islamic identity while presenting a modern image that is relevant to the younger generation (Ambarwati & Sari, 2023; Khoiroh et al., 2025). Universitas Muhammadiyah Tegal (UMT), which was formed through the merger of the Muhammadiyah Tegal Polytechnic and the Muhammadiyah Tegal Polytechnic in 2019, must build a new identity as a university that is intact and not only attached to the image of the previous institution (Ismail & Fadhilah, 2021). This transformation is driving the development of a visual branding system that includes logos, colors, typography, layouts, and digital media.

Although the rebranding of UMT shows a contribution to the increase in the number of new students (Dwitasari et al., 2025), the increase is uneven among scientific groups. Health programs have experienced a significant surge, while vocational and engineering clusters have not shown a commensurate increase. This indicates the inequality of public perception, where UMT is still better known as a "health campus". This condition shows that the post-merger rebranding process has not fully formed a balanced institutional image.

This gap raises important questions about the effectiveness of UMT's visual branding in building the perception and preferences of prospective students across study programs. From the academic side, university branding research in Indonesia still focuses on reputation and service, while studies on the role of DKV elements comprehensively are still limited (Lubis et al., 2023). In addition, research on regional universities such as UMT is also rarely conducted, even though the context of institutional transformation presents unique branding dynamics (Farwati, 2024; Ismail & Fadhilah, 2021). The visual experience aspect of students has not been widely explored, even though it is an important component in the perception of generation Z (Luckyardi et al., 2023).

Based on these conditions, this study aims to examine visual branding, student perception, and student preference within the framework of the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) theory. By empirically testing the proposed relationships, this study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how visual branding is cognitively processed by prospective students and translated into student preference in the higher education context. In contrast to previous research that emphasized more institutional reputation, service quality, or academic factors in college selection, this study specifically highlighted visual branding as a psychological stimulus that is processed through student perception. By applying the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework in the context of post-

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merger private universities in Indonesia, this study offers a new empirical contribution to the study of higher education branding, particularly in understanding how visual elements of communication shape the preferences of prospective students across study programs.

Despite the growing body of research on university branding, existing studies predominantly emphasize academic reputation, service quality, or institutional image, while paying limited attention to the psychological role of visual branding as a primary stimulus in the university selection process (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Kusumawati, 2022; Lubis et al., 2023). Moreover, most prior studies treat visual branding as a supporting communication element rather than a central explanatory mechanism within a behavioral framework.

This study addresses these gaps by positioning visual branding as a core stimulus within the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework and empirically examining how it shapes student preference through perceptual mechanisms in a post-merger private university context. Unlike previous research conducted in established or non-merger institutions, this study highlights the role of visual branding in reconstructing institutional identity and functioning as an initial cognitive filter in student decision-making. By extending the application of SOR theory from commercial and retail settings to an institutional and symbolic context, this study offers a novel theoretical and empirical contribution to the literature on higher education branding, particularly in transitional universities in developing countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) Theory

The Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) theory was put forward by (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) to explain how individuals respond to environmental stimuli through internal psychological processes. In this framework, stimulus refers to external cues received by individuals, organism represents internal cognitive and affective processes, and response refers to attitudinal or behavioral outcomes resulting from these processes. Over time, SOR theory has been widely applied in marketing, consumer behavior, and visual communication studies to explain how environmental cues influence individual decisions (Aljedayah et al., 2023; Donovan et al., 1994)

Visual elements such as logos, colors, typography, layouts, and digital media function as stimuli that are directly perceived by prospective students. These visual stimuli are cognitively and affectively processed, forming perceptions regarding institutional quality, credibility, and identity. The perceptions that emerge then become the basis for

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responses in the form of preferences for choosing a university (Sultan & Wong, 2022). (Aljedayah et al., 2023) emphasized that digital visual stimuli are able to shape perceptions of institutional quality, which subsequently influence students' evaluative judgments and decision tendencies. Therefore, SOR theory provides a relevant conceptual framework to explain how visual branding influences student preferences through psychological mechanisms.

Visual Communication Design (DKV)

Visual communication design is a discipline that focuses on delivering messages through a structured and meaningful visual medium (Dwitasari et al., 2025). DKV elements include logos, colors, typography, layout, imagery, and visual identity consistency. Through the approach of visual semiotics, (Barthes, 1977, 2004) explained that the visual element functions as a sign that carries symbolic meaning, so that the audience not only sees the form, but also interprets the value it contains. The consistency of visual elements has been proven to form a positive association with the professionalism and credibility of the university in the minds of prospective students (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Luckyardi et al., 2023).

In the higher education context, the consistency and coherence of visual elements contribute to perceptions of professionalism, credibility, and institutional seriousness. Previous studies have shown that consistent visual identity positively shapes students' perceptions of universities and enhances institutional credibility in the minds of prospective students (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Luckyardi et al., 2023). Thus, DKV explains what constitutes the visual stimulus in university branding and why visual elements are meaningful from a psychological perspective.

Student Choice Model

The Student Choice Model explains that the decision to choose a university is influenced by academic, social, and symbolic factors (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). Symbolic factors, including visual branding, have an important role in shaping students' perception of institutional quality, especially in generation Z who are highly responsive to visual stimuli (Yoga Kharisma & Haryono, 2023). An attractive and consistent visual identity encourages universities to be considered more often in the selection process (Kusumawati, 2022). For Generation Z, who are highly responsive to visual stimuli and digital communication, visual branding becomes an important symbolic cue in the university selection process (Yoga Kharisma & Haryono, 2023). An attractive, modern,

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and consistent visual identity encourages universities to be more frequently considered by prospective students during the selection stage (Kusumawati, 2022). Therefore, the Student Choice Model supports the positioning of student preference as a logical outcome variable in studies of higher education branding.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Consumer Perception Theory

Perception is a process when individuals choose, organize, and interpret stimuli into certain meanings (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). In the context of college, students assess visual identity as an indicator of the quality and professionalism of the institution, which further influences their preferences and decisions to choose a university (Lubis et al., 2023; Šola & Zia, 2021). This theory reinforces the role of student perception as a key internal psychological process that mediates the influence of visual branding on student preference.

Visual Communication Theory

Visual communication theory explains how visual messages are understood through the audience's experiences, cultures, and expectations (Lester, 2013). Gestalt principles, such as similarity and proximity, show that visual consistency improves the perception of regularity and professionalism (Santosa, 2020). The visual semiotics approach emphasizes that each visual element carries a symbolic meaning that influences students' attitudes and preferences (Barthes, 1977, 2004; Luckyardi et al., 2023). Within the context of higher education branding, these principles explain how visual branding elements function as meaningful stimuli that shape students' perceptions and evaluative responses.

Hypothesis Development

Student perception is the result of interpretation of the university's visual stimuli, such as logos, colors, typography, and digital media, which psychologically form the image of the quality and identity of the institution (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). In the perspective of visual communication, the stimulus serves as a meaningful sign that strengthens cognitive and affective associations with the image of the university (Barthes, 1977). Based on the theoretical framework discussed above, visual branding is conceptualized as a stimulus that initiates cognitive and affective processing within prospective students. This processing forms student perception, which subsequently

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influences student preference as an attitudinal response. In line with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, perception acts as an internal psychological mechanism that bridges visual stimuli and preference outcomes.

Visual Branding on Student Perception

Visual branding represents the first point of interaction between prospective students and a university. Visual elements such as logos, colors, typography, layouts, and digital media convey symbolic meanings that shape students' cognitive and affective evaluations of institutional quality and identity. Consistent and well-designed visual branding strengthens positive perceptions of universities. (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016) Lubis et al., 2023; Luckyardi et al., 2023) prove that (Šola & Zia, 2021). Based on the theoretical discussion and previous empirical findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Visual branding has a positive effect on student perception.

The Influence of Visual Branding on Student Preference

Beyond shaping perception, visual branding may also directly influence student preference. Visual identity functions as a symbolic cue that enhances institutional attractiveness and encourages prospective students to consider a university as a potential choice. The Student Choice Model highlights the importance of symbolic factors, particularly for Generation Z, in shaping student preferences (Dwitasari et al., 2025). Empirical studies have shown that visual branding contributes directly to student preference in higher education selection (Kusumawati, 2022). A number of (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Luckyardi et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2016), as well as (Yoga Kharisma & Haryono, 2023) show that visual branding contributes to the formation of student preferences. It is therefore formulated:

H2: Visual branding has a positive effect on student preference.

The Influence of Student Perception on Student Preference

SOR Theory argues that students' perceptions process visual stimuli into cognitive and affective assessments that influence their preference for choosing a university (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). Positive perceptions of identity and the quality of visual messages drive the tendency to choose universities as the top choice (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). The findings of (Lubis et al., 2023; Luckyardi et al., 2023; Šola & Zia, 2021), reinforce the relationship, so it is formulated:

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H3: The perception of prospective students affects their preference to choose a university.

Student perception as a mediator of the influence of visual branding on the preferences of prospective new students.

SOR theory asserts that visual stimuli influence behavior through internal processes in the form of perception (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In this study, student perception functions as an organism that mediates the relationship between visual branding and student preference. Visual branding evokes psychological stimuli that are interpreted as indicators of the quality and credibility of the institution, so that perception acts as a mediator between visual stimuli and preferences for choosing a university. Studies by (Aljedayah et al., 2023; Lubis et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2016) show the role of perception mediation in similar contexts, so it is formulated:

H4: Student perception mediates the influence of visual branding and student preference.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a quantitative approach with an explanatory design to examine visual branding, perception of prospective students, and preferences to choose a university based on the framework of Stimulus–Organism–Response (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). The research was conducted in the new student admission period for the 2025/2026 academic year, when prospective students actively interacted with the university's visual communication materials. The research population is prospective new students of the University of Muhammadiyah Tegal, with samples determined through purposive sampling on respondents who have been exposed to the university's visual branding. Data collection is carried out during the new student admission period because this phase is the highest intensity stage of exposure to the institution's visual branding to prospective students. All respondents participated voluntarily, anonymously, and had given consent after obtaining an explanation of the purpose of the study. The sample size refers to the SEM rule, which is at least five to ten times the number of indicators (Hair et al., 2021). With about 30 indicators, this study involved 230 respondents.

The research instrument was in the form of a Likert scale questionnaire of 1–5. Visual branding indicators are adapted from (Dwitasari et al., 2025; Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Luckyardi et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2016). The perception indicators refer to (Lubis et al., 2023; Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019; Šola & Zia, 2021), while the student

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preference indicators are adapted from the Student Choice Model (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Kusumawati, 2022).

The data was collected online and offline, then analyzed using SEM based on Partial Least Squares (PLS). The analysis includes validity, reliability, descriptive analysis, as well as hypothesis testing and mediation through bootstrapping procedures (Hair et al., 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study uses the Partial Least Square (PLS), to find answers to hypotheses that are basically predictive. PLS is used to reduce the residual variance of dependent variables when expressing parameter models (Ghozali & Latan, 2015) In this study, respondents filled out 230 questionnaires that were distributed online through google form. All questionnaire data has been collected and prepared for analysis, with a 100% response rate.

Based on the data of the respondents studied, the majority of respondents were male, which was 33.9%, while female respondents amounted to 66.1%. In terms of school origin, most of the respondents came from high school (as many as 50%), which is at a crucial phase in determining higher education institutions. The preferred study program with the highest number of respondents came from the health sector, which was 50%, which shows that UMT's image is still strong as a health-based institution. However, the increasing interest in engineering and design indicates that the rebranding process is starting to have a positive effect on diversifying the university's image. Meanwhile, based on information sources, the majority of respondents (51.3%) seek information through social media. Respondent data management is carried out using SEM-PLS. The test results are presented in Figure 1 and Table 1.

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Figure 1. PLS Algorithm

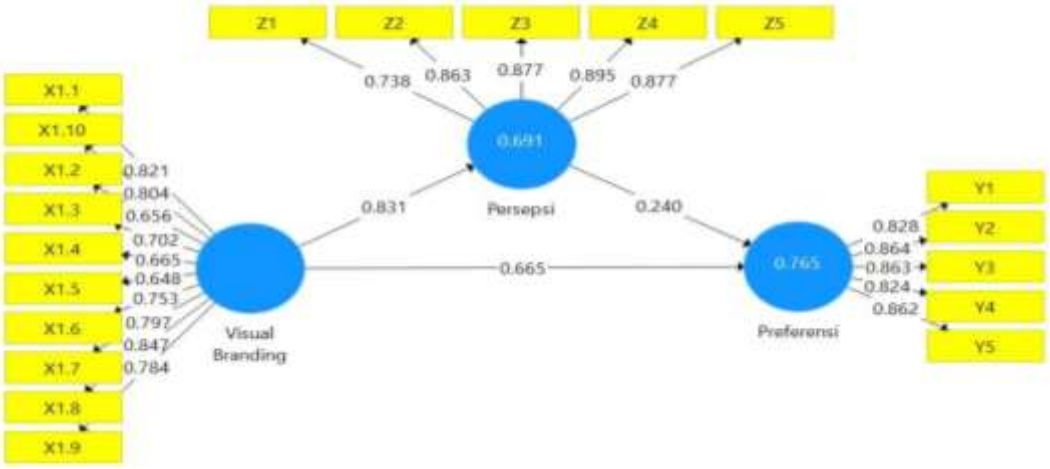


Table 1: Loading Factor

Variable	Indicators	Loading Factor
Visual Branding		
X1.1	The UMT logo is easily recognized and remembered.	0.823
X1.2	The UMT logo well represents the university's identity.	0.656
X1.3	The UMT color combination is consistent across various media.	0.702
X1.4	The UMT branding colors convey a professional impression	0.665
X1.5	The typography used by UMT is easy to read.	0.648
X1.6	The typography supports the university's sense of formality.	0.768
X1.7	The layout of UMT's brochures and website is neat and attractive	0.827
X1.8	The design of UMT's digital media is informative and modern.	0.893
X1.9	The appearance of UMT's branding on social media is consistent with the university's identity.	0.786
X1.10	UMT's visual identity is consistent across all communication platforms	0.848
Perception		
Z1	UMT's visual appearance conveys the impression of a quality university.	0.736
Z2	UMT's branding reflects a clear identity.	0.864
Z3	I feel that UMT's identity is easily understood through visual branding	0.877
Z4	UMT's visual elements evoke positive associations with the university.	0.896
Z5	UMT's visual branding creates a professional and credible perception.	0.877
Prospective Student Preferences		
Y1	I am interested in applying to UMT.	0.827
Y2	I am considering UMT as my top choice for college.	0.867
Y3	I would recommend UMT to friends or family.	0.863

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Y4	UMT's visual branding convinced me to choose UMT.	0.824
Y5	UMT's visual identity increased my interest in continuing my studies there.	0.862

Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis was carried out in two rounds. In the first round, several indicators were below the threshold and the second round showed a loading factor value above 0.7 (Ghozali & Latan, 2015), so that further analysis could be carried out. In addition, discriminant validity testing was also measured in this study to see the extent to which a construct differs from the value of other constructs, by measuring the correlation between constructs and how much the indicators can represent the related constructs. In this study, it was measured using fornell-larcker with the root value of AVE > correlation between constructs (Hair et al., 2014). The results of fornell-larcker in this study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Discriminant Validity Fornell-Larcker

	Perception	Preference	Visual Branding
Perception	0.852		
Preference	0.792	0.864	
Visual Branding	0.810	0.849	0.826

Based on Table 2, the square root value of AVE in each variable is greater than the correlation between variables. So that each variable has a clear difference between each other and meets the criteria of discriminant validity. Furthermore, the results of construct reliability and validity testing in this study are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Reliability and Validity Construct

	Cronbach's Alpha	rho_A	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Visual Branding	0.907	0.913	0.928	0.682
Perception	0.904	0.908	0.929	0.726
Preferences	0.903	0.905	0.928	0.720

Based on the results of the analysis, Table 3 shows that all constructs in the research model show adequate measurement quality in terms of reliability and

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convergent validity. This can be seen from the value of Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability coefficients for each key variable that is above the minimum threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2017), which reflects the high internal consistency of the instrument. In addition, the results of the analysis of the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value > 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). So that this research model can be used to further test the relationship between variables with a high level of confidence in the quality of the data. Furthermore, the R Square test is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: R Square

	R Square	Adjusted R Square
Preferences	0.656	0.654
Perception	0.771	0.769

Based on the results of the analysis in table 4, the Adjusted R Square Value of prospective student preferences is 0.654 which shows that independent factors in the model such as visual branding and perception can include as much as 65.4% variation in prospective student preferences. While the remaining 34.6% is influenced by other variables outside the model. In other words, this model has a fairly conservative adjustment to the number of predictors, and the contribution of independent variables to the prediction of preferences of prospective students is sufficient. This model is powerful enough to explain the preferences of prospective students, so it is necessary to review the possibility of other more relevant variables such as academic reputation, tuition fees, social influences and personal factors of prospective students. In addition, the Adjusted R Square value in perception shows 0.769 which is 76.9% which can be explained by independent variables in the model. This means that the factors referred to in the model have a great contribution in influencing the perception of prospective students. While the rest was influenced by other variables by 23.1%.

Table 5: Path Coefficients

	Original Sample (O)	Sample Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (STDEV)	T Statistik (|O/STDEV|)	P Values	
Visual Branding -> Perception	0.810	0.809	0.025	32.174	0.000	Accepted
Visual Branding -> Preference	0.645	0.644	0.048	13.389	0.000	Accepted

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Perception-> Preference	0.270	0.272	0.055	4.934	0.000	Accepted
Visual Branding -> Perception -> Preference	0.219	0.220	0.045	4.818	0.000	Accepted

Based on the results of the analysis in Table 5, it shows that the path coefficient with a p-value of <0.05 is considered significant for the validity of the hypothesis. The results showed that visual branding had a positive effect on the perception of prospective students, so H1 was accepted. It was also found that the positive influence of visual branding on student preferences was accepted, so H2 was accepted, emphasizing that visual branding plays a role in building a positive initial impression, strengthening the image of the institution, and increasing student interest and trust in determining higher education choices. The results of the analysis for H3 showed a positive relationship between perception of preferences with an original sample value of 0.270 and a p-value of <0.05. Furthermore, the results of the mediation test showed that the perception of prospective students mediated the relationship between visual branding and preference to choose a university with an original sample value = 0.219; p <0.05), until H4 is accepted. These findings confirm that effective visual branding shapes prospective students' positive perceptions of the image, quality and credibility of the university, which further increases their preference in choosing a university. Thus, perception acts as an explanatory mechanism that bridges the influence of visual branding on prospective students' preference decisions.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate that visual branding plays a central role in shaping prospective students' preferences in selecting a university. Visual elements such as logos, colors, typography, layouts, and digital media serve as salient stimuli that influence how prospective students initially assess and interpret an institution's identity. This finding aligns with the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework, which posits that environmental stimuli influence individual responses through internal psychological processes rather than direct behavioral reactions (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In line with previous studies, visual branding functions as a symbolic cue that conveys institutional quality, credibility, and professionalism at the early stage of student–university interaction (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016; Luckyardi et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2016).

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The dominance of visual branding over academic considerations in shaping student preference can be explained by the characteristics of prospective students' decision-making processes, particularly among Generation Z. At the early stage of university selection, prospective students often experience information asymmetry and lack sufficient capability to objectively evaluate academic quality across institutions (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). As a result, they rely more heavily on symbolic and easily accessible cues, such as visual identity and digital appearance, to form initial judgments. In this context, visual branding functions as a cognitive heuristic that simplifies complex institutional attributes into interpretable signals of professionalism and legitimacy. In private universities where academic differentiation is perceived as relatively homogeneous, visual branding becomes a decisive factor that determines whether an institution enters the consideration set of prospective students (Lubis et al., 2023; Šola & Zia, 2021). Thus, visual branding does not replace academic quality, but precedes it in the cognitive hierarchy of evaluation.

The findings also confirm that student perception plays a crucial role in translating visual branding stimuli into preference formation. Visual branding that is consistently designed and symbolically meaningful encourages positive cognitive and affective evaluations regarding institutional identity and quality. This reinforces consumer perception theory, which argues that individuals construct meaning through processes of selecting, organizing, and interpreting stimuli (Schiffman & Wisenblit, 2019). Consistent with prior research, students' perceptions of visual identity significantly contribute to institutional attractiveness and credibility in higher education settings (Lubis et al., 2023; Šola & Zia, 2021). In competitive higher education markets, perception formed through visual branding operates as a key differentiator that influences institutional appeal.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings extend the application of the SOR framework within an institutional context. Unlike retail environments, where stimuli often generate immediate transactional responses, visual branding in higher education primarily influences attitudinal outcomes through evaluative perception (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974). In this study, the organism component of SOR is dominated by cognitive and affective evaluations related to institutional identity, legitimacy, and symbolic value. Consequently, the response manifests as student preference rather than direct enrollment behavior. This supports the argument that SOR remains applicable beyond commercial settings, provided that response variables are conceptualized as attitudinal and symbolic outcomes (Aljedayah et al., 2023; Sultan & Wong, 2022).

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The mediation analysis further reveals that perception partially mediates the relationship between visual branding and student preference. This indicates that visual branding influences preferences through both direct and indirect psychological pathways. On one hand, visual stimuli can immediately attract attention and generate interest; on the other hand, their sustained influence depends on how they are cognitively interpreted as indicators of institutional quality and credibility. This finding nuances the SOR framework by demonstrating that institutional stimuli may initially bypass deep cognitive processing, yet still require perceptual validation to reinforce preference over time (Aljedayah et al., 2023; Nguyen et al., 2016). Such a dual pathway reflects the layered nature of decision-making in higher education, where symbolic appeal and evaluative perception operate simultaneously.

When compared to studies conducted in non-merger universities, the dominance of visual branding observed in this study appears more pronounced. In established institutions with stable reputations, academic quality and institutional legacy often function as primary evaluative cues, while visual branding serves as a complementary element (Hemsley-Brown et al., 2016). In contrast, post-merger universities rely more heavily on visual branding to reconstruct fragmented institutional identities and signal organizational coherence to prospective students (Ismail & Fadhilah, 2021). Similar patterns have been identified in higher education systems in developing countries, where intense competition and limited transparency of academic differentiation increase reliance on branding-related cues (Luckyardi et al., 2023). Conversely, studies in Western contexts frequently emphasize academic reputation and rankings as dominant factors, suggesting that the influence of visual branding is contingent upon institutional maturity and market context(Camilleri, 2021; Yaping et al., 2023).

Overall, these findings highlight the strategic importance of visual branding in transitional institutional contexts. Rather than indicating a decline in the importance of academic quality, the dominance of visual branding reflects its function as an initial cognitive filter in the university selection process. In post-merger universities, visual branding operates not only as a communication tool but also as an institutional mechanism for identity consolidation, legitimacy construction, and perceptual alignment across academic clusters. By integrating visual communication theory with the SOR framework, this study provides a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms underlying the effectiveness of visual branding in higher education.

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CONCLUSION

This study examines the role of visual branding in shaping student perception and preference in higher education using the Stimulus–Organism–Response (SOR) framework. The findings demonstrate that visual branding plays a strategically dominant role in influencing prospective students' preferences, both directly and indirectly through perceptual mechanisms. Student perception is confirmed as a key psychological process that translates visual branding stimuli into evaluative judgments and preference formation.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the higher education branding literature by extending the application of SOR theory beyond its traditional retail and consumer settings into an institutional context. Unlike transactional environments, the response in higher education manifests primarily as attitudinal outcomes such as consideration, prioritization, and recommendation rather than immediate behavioral decisions. By positioning perception as the core organism component and student preference as an attitudinal response, this study demonstrates that SOR remains a robust explanatory framework for symbolic and identity-based decision-making processes in educational institutions.

Empirically, the findings reveal that the dominance of visual branding reflects its function as an initial cognitive filter in the university selection process, particularly among Generation Z. In contexts where academic quality is perceived as relatively homogeneous or difficult to evaluate at early stages, visual branding becomes a salient heuristic that shapes institutional attractiveness and legitimacy. This effect is especially pronounced in post-merger universities, where visual branding serves not only as a communication tool but also as a mechanism for reconstructing institutional identity and aligning fragmented academic images.

Practically, the results provide important implications for university management. Higher education institutions need to manage visual branding strategically and consistently across digital and physical communication platforms. A coherent visual identity can strengthen institutional credibility, shape positive perceptions, and enhance student preference. In post-merger settings, integrated visual branding across faculties and study programs is essential to avoid image dominance in specific academic clusters and to build a balanced and unified institutional identity.

This study has several limitations. First, it focuses on a single institutional context, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional design does not capture changes in perception and preference over time. Future research is encouraged to examine multiple universities, including non-merger institutions and cross-

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country settings, to further validate the contextual dependency of visual branding effects. Longitudinal approaches and the inclusion of additional psychological variables such as trust, emotional attachment, or brand experience may also enrich the understanding of student decision-making processes in higher education.

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